PARROT & CO

By HAROLD MACGRATH

Author of The Carpet From Bagdad, The Place of Honeymoons, etc.

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

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For a moment the click of the balls on the other tables was the only sound. Craig broke the tableau by reaching for his glass of whisky, which he emptied. He tried to assume a nonchalant air, but his hand shook as he replaced the glass on the tabouret. It rolled off to the floor and tinkled into pieces.

"Nerves a bit rocky, eh?" Warrington laughed sardonically.

"You're screeching in the wrong jungle, Parrot, old top," said Mallow, who, as he did not believe in ghosts, was physically nor morally afraid of anything. "Though, you have my word for it that I'd like to see you lose every cent of your oil fluke."

"Don't doubt it."

"But," Mallow went on, "if you're wanting a little argument that doesn't require pencils or voices, why, you're on. You don't object to my friend Craig coming along?"

"On the contrary, he'll make a good witness of what happens."

"The chit, boy!" Mallow paid the reckoning. "Now, then, come on. Three rickshaws!" he called.

The barren plot of ground back of the dock was deserted. Warrington jumped from his rickshaw and divested himself of his coat and flung his hat beside it. Gleefully as a boy Mallow did likewise. Warrington then bade the coolies to move back to the road.

"Rounds?" inquired Mallow.

"You filthy scoundrel, you know very well there won't be any rules to this game. Don't you think I know you?" Warrington rolled up his sleeves and was pleased to note the dull color of Mallow's face. He wanted to rouse the brute in the man, then he would have him at his mercy. "I swore four years ago that I'd make you pay for that night."

"You scum!" roared Mallow, "you'll never be a whole man when they carry you away from here."

"Wait and see."

On the way to the dock Warrington had mapped out his campaign. Fair play from either of these men was not to be entertained for a moment. One was naturally a brute and the other was a coward. They would not hesitate at any means to defeat him. And he knew what defeat would mean at their hands—disfigurement, probably.

"Will you take a shilling for your fifty quid?" jeered Craig. He was going to enjoy this, for he had not the least doubt as to the outcome. Mallow was without superior in a rough and tumble fight.

Warrington did not reply. He walked cautiously toward Mallow. This maneuver brought Craig within reach. It was not a fair blow, but Warrington delivered it without the least compunction. It struck Craig squarely on the jaw. Lightly as a cat Warrington jumped back. Craig's knees doubled under him and he toppled forward on his face.

"Now, Mallow, you and I alone, with no one to jump on my back when I'm looking elsewhere!"

Mallow, appreciating the trick, swore foully, and rushed. Warrington jabbed with his left and sidestepped. One thing he must do and that was to keep Mallow from getting into close quarters. The copra grower was more than his match in the knowledge of those oriental devices that usually cripple a man for life. He must wear him down scientifically; he must depend upon his ring generalship. In his youth Warrington had been a skillful boxer. He could now back this skill with rugged health and a blow that had a hundred and eighty pounds behind it.

From ordinary rage Mallow fell into a frenzy; and frenzy never won a ring battle. Time after time he endeavored to grapple, but always that left stopped him. Warrington played for his face, and to each jab he added a taunt. "That for the little Singalese!" "Count that one for Wheedon's broken knees!" "And wouldn't San admire that? Remember her? The little Japanese girl whose thumbs you broke?" "Here's one for me!" It was not dignified, but Warrington stubbornly refused to look back upon this day either with shame or regret. Jab-jab, cut and slash! went the left. There was no more mercy in the mind back of it than might be found in the sleek felines who stalked the jungles north. Doggedly Mallow fought on, hoping for his chance. He tried every trick he knew, but he could only get so near. The ring was as wide as the world; there were no corners to make grappling a possibility.

Some of his desperate blows got through. The bezel of his ring laid open Warrington's forehead. He was brave enough, but he began to realize that this was not the same man he had turned out into the night four years ago. And the pain and ignominy he had forced upon others was now being returned to him. Warrington would have prolonged the battle had he not seen Craig getting dizzily to his feet. It was time to end it. He feinted swiftly. Mallow, expecting a body blow, dropped his guard. Warrington, as he struck, felt the bones in his hand crack. Mallow went over upon his back, fairly lifted off his feet. He was tough; an ordinary man would have died.

"I believe that squares accounts," said Warrington, speaking to Craig. "If you hear of me in America, in Europe, anywhere, keep away from the places where I'm likely to go. Tell him," with an indifferent jerk of his head toward the insensible Mallow, "tell him that I give him that fifty pounds with the greatest good pleasure. Sorry I can't wait."

He trotted back to his rickshaw, wiped the blood from his face, put on his hat and coat, and ordered the respectful coolie to hurry back to town. He never saw Mallow or Craig again. The battle itself became a hazy incident. In life affairs of this order generally have abrupt endings.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Two Letters.

And all that day Elsa had been waiting patiently to hear sounds of Warrington in the next room. Never could she recall such long, weary hours. Time and again she changed a piece of ribbon, a bit of lace, and twice she changed her dress, all for the purpose of making the hours pass more quickly. Whenever Martha approached Elsa told her that she wanted nothing, that she was headachy, and wanted to be left alone. Discreetly Martha vanished.

To prevent the possibility of missing him, Elsa had engaged the room boy to loiter about downstairs and to report to her the moment Warrington arrived. The boy came pattering up at a quarter to six.

"He come. He downside. I go, he come topside?"

"No. That will be all."

The following ten minutes tested her patience to the utmost. Presently she heard the banging of a trunk lid. He was there. What was she going to say to him? The trembling that struck at her knees was wholly a new sensation. Presently the tremor died away, but it left her weak. She stepped toward his door and knocked gently on the jamb.

She heard something click as it struck the floor. (It was Warrington's cutty, which he had carried for seven years, now in smithereens.) She saw a hand, raw knuckled and bleeding slightly, catch at the curtain and swing it back upon its rings.

"Miss Chetwood?" he said.

"Yes . . . Oh, you've been hurt!" she exclaimed, noting the gash upon his forehead. A strip of tissue paper (in lieu of court plaster) lay soaking upon that wound—a trick learned in the old days when razors grew dull overnight.

"Hurt? Oh, I ran against something when I wasn't looking," he explained lamely. Then he added eagerly: "I did not know that you were on this gallery. First time I've put up at a hotel in years." It did not serve.

"You have been fighting! Your hand."

He looked at the hand dumbly. How keen her eyes were.

"Was it . . . Mallow? Did you . . . whip him?"

"I . . . did," imitating her tone and hesitance. It was the wisest thing he could have done, for it relaxed the nerves of both of them.

Elsa smiled, smiled and forgot the substance of all her rehearsals, forgot the letter of credit, warm with the heat of her heart. "I am a pagan," she confessed.

"And I am a barbarian. I ought to be horribly ashamed of myself."

"But you are not?"

For a moment their eyes drew. Hers were like dark whirlpools, and he felt himself drifting helplessly, irresistibly. He dropped his hands upon the railing and gripped; the illusion of fighting a current was almost real to him. Every fiber in his body cried out against the struggle.

"No, not in the least," he said, looking toward the sunset. "Fighting is riff-raff business, and I'm only a riff-raffer at best."

"Rather, aren't you Paul Ellison, brother, twin brother, of the man I said I was going home to marry?"

How far away her voice seemed! The throb in his forehead and the dull ache over his heart, where some of the sledge-hammer blows had gone home, he no longer felt.

"Don't deny it. It would be useless. Knowing your brother as I do, who could doubt it?"

He remained dumb.

"I couldn't understand, just simply couldn't. They never told me; in all the years I have known them, in all the years I have partly made their home my own, there was nothing. Not a trinket. Once I saw a camera picture. I know now why Arthur snatched it from my hand. It was you. You were bending over an engineer's tripod. Even now I should have doubted had I not recalled what you said one day on board, that you had built bridges. Arthur couldn't build anything stronger than an artist's easel. You are Paul Ellison."

"I am sorry you found out."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to be no more than an incident in your life, just Parrot & Co."

"Parrot & Co.!"

It was like a caress; but he was too dull to sense it, and she was unconscious of the inflection. The burning sunshine gave to his hair and beard the glistening of ruddy gold. Her imagination, full of unsuspected poetry at this moment, clothed him in the metals of a viking. There were other whirlpools besides those in her eyes, but Elsa did not sense the drifting as he had done. It was insidious.

"An incident," she repeated.

"Could I be more?" with sudden fierceness. "Could I be any more in any woman's life? I take myself for what I am, but the world will always take me for what I have done. Yes, I am Paul Ellison, forgotten, I hope, by all those who knew me. Why did you seek me that night? Why did you come into my life to make bitterness become despair? The blackest kind of despair. Elsa Chetwood, Elsa! . . . Well, the consul is right. I am a strong man. I can go out of your life, at least physically. I can say that I love you, and I can add to that good-by!"

He wheeled abruptly and went quickly down the gallery, bareheaded, without any destination in his mind, with only one thought, to leave her before he lost the last shreds of his self-control.

It was then that Elsa knew her heart. She had spoken truly. She was a pagan—for, had he turned and held out his hands, she would have gone to him, gone with him, anywhere in the world, lawfully or unlawfully.

Elsa sang. When Martha came to help her dress for dinner she still sang. It was a wordless song, a melody that every human heart contains and which finds expression but once. Elsa loved.

Doubt, that arch-enemy of love and faith and hope, doubt had spread its dark pinions and flown away into yesterdays. She felt the zest and exhilaration of a bird just given its freedom. Once she slipped from Martha's cunning hands and ran out upon the gallery.

"Elsa, your waist!"

Elsa laughed and held out her bare arms to the faded sky where, but a little while since, the sun had burned a pathway down the world. All in an hour, one small trifling space of time, this wonderful, magical thing had happened. He loved her. There had been hunger for her in his voice, in his blue eyes. Presently she was going to make him feel very sorry that he had not taken her in his arms, then and there.

"Elsa, what in mercy's name possesses you?"

"I am mad, Martha, mad as a March hare, whatever that is!" She loved.

"People will think so, if they happen to come along and see that waist. Please come instantly and let me finish hooking it. You act like you did when you were ten. You never would stand still."

"Yes, and I remember how you used to yank my pigtails. I haven't really forgiven you yet."

"I believe it's going home that's the matter with you. Well, I for one shall be glad to leave this horrid country. Chinamen everywhere, in your room, at your table, under your feet. And in the streets, Chinamen and Malays and Hindus, and I don't know what other outlandish races and tribes. Why, what's all this?" cried Martha, bending to the floor.

Elsa ran back to the room. She gave a little gasp when she saw what it was that Martha was holding out for her inspection. It was Warrington's letter of credit. She had totally forgotten its existence. Martha could not help seeing it. Elsa explained frankly what it was and how it had come into her possession. Martha was horrified.

"Elsa, they might have entered your room; and your jewels lying about everywhere! How could you be so careless?"

"But they didn't. I'll return this to Mr. Warrington in the morning; perhaps tonight, if I see him at dinner."

"He was in the next room, and we never knew it!" The final hook snapped in place. "Well, Wednesday our boat leaves;" as if this put a period to all further discussion anent Mr. Parrot & Co. Nothing very serious could happen between that time and now.

"Wednesday night." Elsa began to sing again, but not so joyously. The petty things of every-day life were lifting their heads once more, and of necessity she must recognize them.

She sat at the consul general's table, informally. There was gay inconsequential chatter, an exchange of recollections and comparisons of cities and countries they had visited at separate times; but neither she nor he mentioned the chief subject of their thoughts. She refrained because of a strange yet natural shyness of a woman who has found herself; and he, because from his angle of vision it was best that Warrington should pass out of her life as suddenly and mysteriously as he had entered it. Had he spoken frankly he would have saved Elsa many a bitter heartache, many a weary day.

Warrington was absent, and so were his enemies. If there was any truth in reincarnation Elsa was confident that in the splendid days of Rome she had beaten her pink palms in applause of the gladiators. Pagan; she was all of that; for she knew that she could have looked upon Mallow's face with more than ordinary interest. Nevermore would her cheeks burn at the recollection of the man's look.

In her room, later, she wrote two letters. The one to Arthur covered several pages; the other consisted of a single line. She went down to the office, mailed Arthur's letter and left the note in Warrington's key box. It was not an intentionally cruel letter she had written to the man in America; but if she had striven toward that effect she could not have achieved it more successfully. She cried out against the way he had treated his brother, the false pride that had hidden all knowledge of him from her. Where were the charity and mercy of which he had so often preached? Pages of burning reproaches which seared the soul of the man who read them. She did not confide the state of her heart. It was not necessary. The arraignment of the one and the defense of the other were sufficiently illuminating.

Soundly the happy sleep. She did not hear the removal of Warrington's luggage at midnight, for it was stealthily done. Neither did she hear the fretful mutter of the bird as his master disturbed his slumbers. Nothing warned her that he intended to spend the night on board; that, having paid his bill early in the evening, her note might have lain in the key box until the crack of doom, so far as he was likely to know of its existence. No angel of pity whispered to her, Awake! No dream magic people tell about drew for her the picture of the man she loved, pacing up and down the cramped deck of the packet boat, fighting a battle compared to which that of the afternoon was play. Elsa slept on, dreamless.

When she awoke in the morning she ran to the mirror—all this fresh beauty she was going to give to him, without condition, without reservation, absolutely. She dressed quickly, singing lowly. Fate makes us the happiest when she is about to crush us.

Usually she had her breakfast served in the room, but this morning she was determined to go downstairs. She was excited; she brimmed with exuberance; she wanted Romance to begin at once.

"Good morning," she greeted the consul general, who was breakfasting alone.

"Well, you're an early bird!" he replied. By the way, our romantic Parrot & Co. have gone."

"Gone?" Elsa stared at him.

"Yes. Sailed for Saigon at dawn, and I am rather glad to see him go. I was afraid he might interest you too much. Good heavens, Elsa, what is the matter?"

"No, no! Don't touch me. I'm not the fainting kind. Did you know last night that he was going?"

"Yes."

"I shall never forgive you. Never, never! You knew and did not tell me. Do you know who Paul Ellison is? He is the brother of the man at home. You knew he was stealing away and did not tell me."

She could not have made the truth any plainer to him. He sat back in his chair, stunned, voiceless.

"I am going to my room," she said. "Do not follow. Please act as if nothing had happened."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Convincing Argument.

Timid Lady (about to buy a ticket for New York)—And is the boat that sails on Thursday perfectly safe?

Agent (gravely)—Madam, I can assure you that in all the time this ship has been in service, and that is now a number of years, not once has she gone to the bottom.

Timid Lady (reassured)—Oh, then it must be all right. What cabins have you vacant?—London Tit-Bits.